

I

To Be Named

And the one was as three, with three faces turned to reflect the light of Himself. We saw Him, and we saw Him above Him, and we wept.

—*Book of the Sun, Author Unknown, OS 246*

405 rocked back and forth on the hard wood of the bench, counting seconds to keep herself sane. The holding room was close and musty, each inhalation forcing the scent of sweat and blood into her nostrils. She paused in her rocking to tug her arms to one side, then the other, feeling her muscles pull under her skin. Her heart hammered against her ribcage, and she tried to listen for irregularities. It seemed normal; she seemed fine. She would have to be. She ran her fingers over the rough fabric of her shirt, over the place where the glyph was carved into her chest. It was the least of her gift, but the most visible portion. Even a month after the operation, it twinged under her fingers.

A man's shaved head popped in through a curtain at the back of the room, shining dully above clean white robes: one of the Sun's servants.

"The test is ready," he said.

She nodded and stood. The servant vanished as quickly as he

had come. 405 was glad for it. She was sure she was trembling hard enough to be seen from across the room.

She shook herself, trying to project confidence as she walked towards the door at the front. Resisting the impulse to lift back the sleeves of her shirt and look at the black ink words that covered her arms was difficult. She hated that they were hidden. It was almost like having her hands tied behind her back.

Pushing open the heavy metal doors to the outside world, 405 blinked in the midday sun. The light bathed the arena, dispelling all shadows save for those beneath her own feet. Some thirty paces away, standing in front of their own door, were two men she knew well. Both were wearing only the same loose pants that she wore, leaving their chests bare as they had no tattoos of their own to cover. Tide, tall and willowy, his hair shaved to the barest stubble, was from the class above hers. His gift was on the backs of his hands, displayed prominently: two glyphs for water burned into the skin. A quick glance to the sides showed her that they had flooded the arena's gutters for his use.

To his left was Boulder, the first to earn his name from her class. He was the only one faster than her; given his class rank, she could feel some favoritism in the matter, the weight of a general's finger on the scale. It must have been someone who wanted a living wrecking ball for an apprentice. None of the Adar had families, after all, to bias the process. Boulder was short where Tide was tall, and thick as tree trunks in limb. His gifts, like most of hers, were internal: his bones had been cored with steel, and his skin and muscles supplemented to bear the weight of it. A steel glyph on his chest allowed him to move his enormous bulk as quick as a viper. She had seen him punch through stone walls before.

405 frowned at the pair—there should have been three. Tide and Boulder gave no sign of confusion, however. She looked up to see that most of the seats around the arena were empty and felt a slight wrench in her gut. Her instructors had not come. She had

hoped Vein might have been there, to support her, even silently. She didn't dare turn her head to check behind her, in case the two men took it for nerves, glancing about like a caged animal.

The greatest surprise was the box across from her, the royal box, covered from the sun and dressed in fine white silk curtains. Normally, her two judges would sit on either side, but today those seats were empty. Instead, it seemed that His Radiance himself had come to give her judgement. Two Adar she didn't know—Hands of the Sun—stood just under the shade, arms folded before their red tunics, their hard eyes daring her to so much as look threatening. The Sun was settled comfortably on a cushioned chair between them and looking entirely at ease. Just barely beyond middle age, his golden eyes sharp below a full head of pale blonde hair, he gave the impression of a diving bird waiting just above the shallows. Her throat suddenly felt dry as the hard dirt under her feet.

She had to impress God, now, not just the other Adar.

He had one of his sons with him as well, though she didn't know them well enough to say which. Standing behind them both with her delicate face as placid as the blue sky above was his only daughter, Errena.

Phenomenal, 405 thought. *If I lose, I'm dead and I'm a joke to her. But where—*

God rose from his seat. Her thoughts cut off immediately, and she went down to a single knee, her face still turned to the Sun. Across the arena, Tide and Boulder did the same.

“Unfortunately,” the Sun's voice rang out around the arena, cool and clear. “Quake has been unable to offer his services this morning. I present a replacement. Loman?”

With a bow to his father, the sunschild stepped forward. One of the Adar spoke a few words, and the stones of the arena wall slid into stairs that Loman strutted down.

Fuck, she thought.

Loman looked perhaps a decade her senior, as tall and hand-

some as his father, in a spotless white robe belted with golden cord. He smiled genially at her. On the other side of the arena, she saw Tide and Boulder shift subtly, edging away from him. It was good to know that they were afraid, too. If Loman got so much as a scratch, they might all be in a noose by sunset. And if he so much as touched any of them, they might well wish they were.

“You all know the rules,” the Sun continued breezily.

405 did indeed. The timer would begin, and she would have to survive against the best efforts of the three men to kill her for three minutes. Though all the combatants had access to hundreds of words that could be used to control different materials—at least, she, Boulder and Tide did; she did not know if Loman could read the words—for this contest, each was allowed only one. That word was their gift, individual to every Adar, the one which did not need to be spoken aloud to be used. If any of them talked, the test would be forfeit to the other side, which had somewhat asymmetric consequences for her and for them. Thus were her arms covered, to remove the temptation to read a glyph aloud in the heat of the moment. But she would not talk. And that was all: survive three minutes in silence.

“Go on, start,” the Sun said, waving his hand. One of the Adar by his sides turned over a large hourglass and held it up.

She did not need to be told twice.

Blood pounded in 405’s ears, and a sense of calm washed over her. Now that it had begun, her nerves evaporated. She launched herself forward before either Tide or Boulder could move, static crackling at her fingers. With a sweep of her hand, she sent a bolt of bright lightning at Boulder. He only barely dodged, landing with a crash that would have broken another man’s bones. The mass of altered flesh righted himself like a puppet pulled to attention and ran at her, head down as if to impale her on invisible horns. She jumped aside only at the last second, letting his momentum carry him behind her. Boulder spun quickly and

ran at her again, forcing her to dance back and forth, dodging his rushing attacks and slipping under his punches. She ducked, leapt backward, ducked again, keeping her breathing even, looking for an opportunity to strike. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Loman closing from behind. With no more time to wait, she rolled under another blow from Boulder, hopping to her feet with eyes on both.

She realized her vulnerability as a thin stream of gritty water filled her mouth, forcing itself down her throat—Tide had joined the fight. Without thinking she sent waves of electricity through her body, evaporating the water, leaving only sand clinging to her tongue. She spat and jumped aside as Boulder crashed past her again, narrowly missing her. Her most unexpected gift from the electricity glyph carved on her chest had been speed; she could make her limbs react faster, and with more power, than should have been possible.

But it was only barely enough to keep her out of Boulder's range. The big man charged again and launched a punch at her face that would have turned her skull into jelly. She jumped and rolled to the side, finding herself face-to-face with Tide, who had been hovering near the Sun's box. The man clearly had not been expecting her to land before him and backpedaled at once, hands drawing streams of water toward her like arrows. Taking a deep breath, she formed a sphere of lightning around herself and sent it pulsing outwards, turning water to air, and just hitting Tide as he tried to jump away. He fell twitching.

She had no time to celebrate. Pain shocked through her arm as Boulder grabbed her wrist, bones crunching in his iron grip. He grinned at her with a horrific satisfaction, an audible snap in the air. She clenched her teeth to keep from screaming. Before he could reach for her windpipe, however, lightning arced down her arm and into his body. The grin turned to a grimace of pain, and the smell of burning hair and skin filled her nose. Boulder's fingers froze in their upward climb towards her neck.

Seconds passed before he at last snatched his hand away, and she jumped back, but not before the damage had been done. 405 could not move her left hand. She cursed and scrambled away, nearly backing into Loman, who reached at her with hands like claws. It was too bright to see the glow surrounding him, but she knew it was there. Jumping away from both, she landed neatly in a crouch at the other end of the arena with her bad arm cradled close to her body.

They approached her cautiously from either side. Boulder was grinning, the hair on his left arm still releasing wisps of smoke. The damned man was too dense to fall easily. She didn't dare send a bolt straight at Loman, either; the consequences of a hit might well be as bad as a miss if she didn't calibrate her power correctly.

405 spared a glance upwards for the timer. As she watched, the last few grains of sand trickled down into the lower chamber. The Sun looked at it, then quirked a small smile at her from his seat. She could have screamed in anger, but instead clenched her jaws again to keep silent. If she wasn't careful, the bonesmiths would have to fix her teeth as well as her arm.

Boulder and Loman were so close.

An idea struck her.

She straightened and backed slowly away, broken arm still folded, her eyes fixed on Loman. *Make Boulder think I'm distracted.* With her mind, the sixth sense of the Adar, she felt for the little pulses of electricity that ran through Boulder's body. It was the first thing she had noticed after the operation that had given her the gift, the little bundles of shock that pointed out every living thing, even when her eyes were closed. Boulder didn't move like a normal man, of course. He used magic to lift his limbs. But the pulses were still there, and with the right prodding—

Boulder jumped at her. She dodged towards Loman, ducking under Boulder's punch, and running a few paces beyond. She came up to see Boulder launch himself forward again, attempting

to skirt the sunschild.

Gotcha, she thought, finding the bundle of electricity in Boulder's arm and flaring it as hard as she could. The huge man's arm sprang outward just as he passed by Loman, catching the white robed man in the lower ribs with a slash like a knife. Loman roared and crumpled to the ground. As though hitting a wall, Boulder jerked to a halt and fell to his knees beside the sunschild, his face twisted in horror.

"Father, the timer, please," 405 heard Errena say, just audible over the blood still rushing in her ears. Then the scream from one of the Adar:

"Highness!"

Everything was drowned by the noise of Boulder howling like a wounded khrek as he took a good look at his own injury, the hand that had hit Loman strangely grey and unresponsive. Now that the motion had ceased, pain began to leak through 405's adrenaline. To avoid looking down at either of the wounded men, or at her own arm, she looked back up at the box of the Sun. One of the Adar was helping Errena down over the railing and onto stairs he had created again from the wall. The Sun's daughter was wearing a gauzy white robe and wide golden belt, her pale blonde hair loose and shimmering in the sun. Her face was grim, her back straight as an arrow.

Still clutching her broken arm, 405 set her features into what she hoped was an expression of timidity. She didn't dare try to fix the wound herself; she had some skill as a bonesmith, but she wasn't sure if the contest was over yet. To heal herself would be to speak, and perhaps forfeit, so she gritted her teeth and waited.

Errena went to her brother first, wiping the blood from his mouth as her guard glared wordlessly around at the other Adar. 405 let herself curl down a little as she watched Errena work, trying to dampen her unwomanly height, to appear less of a threat. It would do her no good to frighten the Sun's daughter, and even less good to let the Adar shadowing her think that she meant

to. She didn't know his gift, and she didn't want to find out. Certainly not with her arm in this condition.

A lonely cloud passed over the sun, and for a moment she could see the glow surrounding Errena as she held Loman's face. A power like no other, one that was reserved for the women of the Sun's family: the power to heal, the opposite of the burning light Loman and his Father wielded. The Sun claimed that the powers were a gift from his celestial blood. 405 thought that perhaps the powers were glyphs, kept secret, carved internally at birth. What she wouldn't give to know glyphs like those. They would receive a place of pride on her arms, in one of the bare spots near her wrists, perhaps even on her palms.

She shook her head: *blasphemy*.

Soon enough, Loman rose to his feet, unsteady but no longer drooling blood. Boulder's screaming had subsided into a low whimper as he cradled his own useless arm. Errena strode over to him and grabbed his hand with exaggerated indelicacy. He yelped and was silent, flexing his newly healed fingers in front of his face with a childlike wonder.

405 straightened unconsciously as Errena came towards her. She was about a head and a half shorter than 405, a more appropriate height for an Orassian woman, her soft curves standing in contrast to the iron in her gaze. Errena looked up at her.

"Your arm," she said quietly, holding out her hand.

405 knew better than to disagree with royalty. She offered her broken wrist and purpling hand, Errena's silk fingers making her conscious of her own rough skin. All at once 405 felt as though her hand had turned to ice.

"It is my father's fault that this happened," Errena whispered.

405 drew in a sharp breath.

"He wanted to push you. I told him that it would just get Loman hurt, but I suppose he knew that. He made me come, after all. There, you'll be fine."

405 looked down at her wrist. It looked as though it had never

been broken. She glanced at Errena's face, flawless and round, her eyes as pale a gold as her skin. Errena stared back up at her, inquisitively.

"Did you do that to your hair?" She reached up and ran a finger over 405's chin-length black hair. Her touch felt like lightning running down 405's body. "So short," Errena whispered, half to herself. "And your eyes. . . ?"

She trailed off, looking into 405's eyes. 405 blinked and looked down. She had dyed her irises blue when she was young, even before she had joined the Adar. It had been one of her first uses of magic; she could barely remember having done it. Normally she loved the shocked stares it earned her—but looking down at Errena, it suddenly seemed childish. 405 prayed to the Sun that she was not blushing.

"Daughter," a cool voice said. 405 twitched and fell to one knee, eyes on the ground. The Sun had come down into the arena. "Would you like the honor of naming this one?"

405's heart leapt. She had passed after all. And before His Radiance himself, she had earned her name.

"I would," Errena said. 405 felt soft fingers on the top of her head. Electricity that had nothing to do with her gift shocked her. A few breaths of silence passed, and then: "I call you Aura."

She had a name. She turned it over in her mind:

Aura.

Aura, Au-ra, A-ura, Aur-a, Aura.

It felt good; like a homecoming. It had been—what, ten years?—since she had a name. This one fit like a well-worn glove. She settled into it gratefully, smiling up at the woman who had named her.

The Sun nodded once, not looking at his daughter.

"Rise, Aura. We have work to do."